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ABSTRACT

Despite their prominence, the voices of superintendents are rarely heard regarding their personal triumphs and challenges in educational administration and serving the needs of students. Chapter 1, "A Lock at the Featured Superintendents," introduces 14 superintendents and reviews their careers. Chapter 2, "The Good: Dealing With Tough Issues By Doing Right," presents their reflections on the leap to superintendency and how they tackled tough problems they encountered during their careers. Chapter 3, "The Bad: Putting Rocks in Your Pockets," captures the superintendents' viewpoints on many career changes, and examines the issues which complicate leadership. Chapter 4, "The Ugly: The Human Toll of Leadership," explores the human toll of superintendency on both the employee and their family. Chapter 5, "Words From the Wise," provides the collective wisdom regarding preparation for superintendency, changes in school boards, and other challenges that successful superintendents have confronted. Chapter 6, "The Saving Graces: Core Values and Kids," explains how these superintendents sustain their professional dedication to helping kids despite the imposing challenges they face. (TEJ)

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THE ANGUISH OF LEADERSHIP

JERRY PATTERSON

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The Anguish of Leadership

Jerry Patterson

American Association of School Administrators
1801 N. Moore St.
Arlington, VA 22209
(703) 875-0748
http://www.aasa.org

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Executive Director, Paul D. Houston
Deputy Executive Director, E. Joseph Schneider
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BOOK DEDICATION

To each of the men and women who

choose the superintendent's journey and who,

along the way, learn firsthand about

the anguish of leadership.

Foreword

Today's schools have been described as the "world of permanent white water," where nothing remains tranquil for even a moment. The skills required to navigate the rapids cannot be taught in a graduate course; they are learned amidst the changing currents and submerged hazards. Every school system has unique currents and undertows, but all share the goal of educating all their children. The most visible person in that enterprise is the superintendent, but we rarely hear directly from superintendents about their personal triumphs and challenges.

The 14 superintendents profiled in this book share several characteristics. Each of these eight men and six women has led complex and diverse education systems and is among the acknowledged leaders in the profession. Their stories reveal their successes and satisfactions, as well as the seemingly inevitable erosion of support. Whether the path was smooth for 2 years or for 25, when the rough times arrived, the price was high. These superintendents unflinchingly describe the pain their families endured when boards changed membership or when a community was in conflict. These men and women credit their families for providing support and balance during difficult times, and recognize the toll that

their leadership roles often exacted from spouses and children.

These honest and insightful profiles reveal a dimension of superintendents not often evident to the public. The passion for children and commitment to their learning that led these men and women to leadership positions carried them through the roughest days. Their messages will not insulate others from the challenges of the job, but they do offer an invaluable view from the inside, and a reminder that each of us must develop and nurture the core values and strengths that allow us to maintain a steady course.

Jerry Patterson offers a window on the superintendency that gives all of us – aspiring, current, and former superintendents – a fresh view of its highs and lows, and renewed appreciation of those who serve our schools and their children.

Paul D. Houston
AASA Executive Director

Introduction

PLENTY OF EXISTING BOOKS ARE FILLED with charts, statistics, and lists about how to be an effective superintendent. This book contains none of these things. Instead, *The Anguish of Leadership* shares firsthand accounts of what it is like to be a school district leader. It is full of wisdom, emotion, and lessons learned by 14 people who have spent their professional lifetimes preparing for and then serving as school superintendents, and who have distinguished themselves in this important role.

The talented educators interviewed for this book are stand outs in the field, but they are also representative of their colleagues across the 15,000 school districts in the United States. The eight men and six women you'll meet in this book have held 28 superintendencies in 14 different states, from the upper reaches of the Pacific Northwest to the swamp lands of the Southeast, from the hot Southwest to the chilly Northeast. They offer the perspective of ethnic minority superintendents, two African American females and one Hispanic male. They have led districts ranging from 1,000 students in quiet, rural settings to bustling urban districts of over 300,000 students. Together, they have been charged with overseeing the education of 900,000 students in a given year; they've played a significant role in the education and lives of several million students.

I should point out that this book is not investigative journalism. Even though the superintendents shared with honesty and authenticity what they remember as the reality of their careers, their memory is colored by time, emotion, and bias about what is right and just. Thus, when

the superintendents speak with candor about their struggles with school boards, unions, and city hall politics, there is no intent on my part to validate the absolute truth of the situation nor to intentionally cast any group in a bad light. My goal is simply to allow the story of the superintendency to be told by those who have lived the experience.

When I first got the idea for this book, I approached senior staff of the American Association of School Administrators and other nationally recognized trainers of superintendents with the following request: "Help me identify superintendents across the nation who are widely respected, talented educators, and who are near the end of their superintendent careers or recently retired." I made this request because I wanted this book to capitalize on the collective wisdom of a group drawing insights from a career's worth of experiences. In one sense, then, the superintendents participating in this study are not statistically representative of their peers. In another sense, though, they represent school district leaders everywhere.

I'm sure those of you who have served or currently serve as superintendent will identify with parts of each of these leader's stories; you may feel a kindred spirit with particular storytellers. Indeed, as a former superintendent, at times I could feel my own emotions involuntarily creeping to the surface as these superintendents recounted their struggles and accomplishments.

For those of you deciding whether you should aspire to be superintendent, my hope is that *The Anguish of Leadership* provides an invaluable set of insights about the professional and personal struggles and accomplishments. Each story contains inspiring messages about great heights in professional achievement as well as depressing lows of defeat. The superintendents interviewed for this book are the first to emphasize that their highs and lows contain powerful lessons learned the hard way. Their collective wish is that *The Anguish of Leadership* will make the lessons a little easier for superintendents in the future.

I have taken the liberty, with the superintendents' permission, to assign them each a pseudonym in this book. I took this step to assure them the rare opportunity to talk openly about their own superintendency without concern about editing their thoughts. After all, the actual names aren't so important. The stories are the message.

The message begins in Chapter 1 with each superintendent sharing an overview of his or her career leading up to the superintendency. This overview gives us a chance to know each person and to better understand the context surrounding his or her move into the superintendency.

Chapter 2 presents the superintendents' reflections on the good times they enjoyed as school district leaders. They share what it is like to make the quantum leap to the superintendent's seat, and the satisfaction they felt when tackling tough problems.

Chapter 3 captures the feelings and thoughts of the superintendents as they experienced changing conditions in their careers. From erosion of board support to other "rocks in their pockets," the stories are remarkably similar as the superintendents talk about some of the governance issues that make school district leadership difficult.

The 14 superintendents talk candidly in Chapter 4 about the human toll of this important job on themselves and their families.

Chapter 5 provides the collective wisdom of the superintendents' more than 250 years of experience. These veteran leaders pull no punches as they discuss lessons learned the hard way about topics ranging from how to prepare for the superintendency (and later exit gracefully) to strong words on how to deal with the changing composition of school boards and other challenges.

The final chapter sheds light on why these superintendents have endured the anguish of the job for so many years. These talented, respected individuals sacrificed a great deal because of their passion for a focused purpose: to help kids.

Chapter 1

A Look at the Featured Superintendents

Before interviewing each of the superintendents you will meet in this book, I constructed a set of questions about the nature of the superintendent's work, the difficulties encountered in leading a school district toward organizational goals, and the burdens and gratification of the job. Before getting into their answers to these questions, I'd like to introduce you to each of them and tell you a bit about their path to the superintendency. As I said, you will likely see yourself in one or many of them.

Bryan Brown

When I walked into the room to interview Bryan Brown, my first impression was that I was meeting someone who is part scholar, part minister, part football coach, and part businessman. With his bow tie, dapper suit, and a headset on for hands-free phone conversations, Brown seemed to have everything under control. My first impression wasn't far off.

Brown didn't plan to become a superintendent. In fact, he didn't plan to be an educator at all. He majored in English at the undergraduate

level and planned to enter the seminary after graduation. His plans changed, though, in a hurry.

"During my senior year, I student taught as an elective. Then I decided I wanted to teach. My first assignment was as a high school English teacher as well as department chair." For Brown, this early taste of quasi-administration became just the first leg of a journey through a distinguished, decorated career in education.

Brown quickly established himself as a leader. After about three years as a high school teacher, he accepted an administrative position as supervisor of English. Then, at the tender age of 28, and despite objections of some board members, Brown was appointed to the high school principal's job in the same school district. "It was the greatest learning experience of my life. We [the faculty] laughed together, we cried together. And the whole time we were tough on behavior and high on expectations."

Because of his successful leadership, Brown was lured to the State Department of Education, where he served for three years in a key administrative role. His next career stop was at the superintendent's office. Brown intended for that to be a short stopover. "But what was intended to be a sprint turned out to be a long-distance run of 13 years." Even with 21 board member changes in 13 years, Brown distinguished himself as a strong leader. In fact, he was so successful that the State Department grabbed him again and put him at the top of the organizational chart.

Then came the phone call pleading for him to assume the leadership vacancy in one of the state's highest performing school districts. He answered the call and, once again, wasted no time making his mark. As he reflected on his return to the superintendency, Brown smiled and said with a touch of contentment in his voice, "It's been a great time."

Claire Cleveland

I knew Claire Cleveland by reputation for several years before contacting her about this book. Her name is among the Who's Who of leading superintendents and, as our conversation developed, it

became clear her reputation is well deserved. She is simultaneously warm and businesslike, charming and no-nonsense. Above all, she is the personification of a truly professional educator.

Cleveland's fond memories of her own education became the catalyst for her career as an educator. "I majored in education and, immediately upon graduation, began a very successful period as an elementary teacher."

After eight years as an elementary teacher, Cleveland accepted a central-office assignment as a science and social studies supervisor. In that role, she was instrumental in sharpening teachers' awareness about the real (rather than textbook) description of African Americans throughout history. Out of her personal efforts grew an office for African American studies in the school district. She said with a touch of nostalgia, "Those were some interesting times in my life."

Cleveland swiftly worked her way up the administration ladder. She held a director's position in early childhood education and takes pride in the nationally acclaimed programs started during her tenure. She then worked as an associate superintendent and, ultimately, superintendent in the same large urban district. Cleveland was selected to lead this district into the future. Unfortunately, as she shares her story, the anguish of her last few years seems to have clouded any sense she might have had of the superintendency being the pinnacle of a shining career.

Andrew Garland

I interviewed Andrew Garland in his office on a Saturday morning. When we shook hands, I recalled having met him previously at a conference, and how much his colleagues valued his contributions there. Clean-cut and reserved, he is not someone driven to dominate air time in a meeting. But when he speaks, people listen.

As we began the interview, my thoughts temporarily drifted to the sounds of emptiness in the building. Little did I know that this same feeling of emptiness would eventually seep into the conversation as Garland talked openly about his own anguish during the final months of his superintendency.

Garland's career in education began like many of his male colleagues. He didn't intend to be an educator. Armed with a degree in history and pushed into a rush of interviews with major corporations, Garland quickly realized that was not what he wanted to do with his life. Encouraged by his grandfather's lengthy career as a superintendent and his father's brief teaching stint, Garland became an English teacher and followed the conventional path for males en route to the superintendent's job.

For several years Garland demonstrated strong leadership as a high school principal. He received national attention as a principal and soon packed his bags to accept an assistant superintendent job in a neighboring state. This upward career trajectory continued with Garland's appointment to an area superintendent's position in one of the nation's most recognized school districts. After enjoying five years of leadership success and resisting several opportunities to move on, Garland finally got an offer he couldn't refuse in the form of a highly coveted superintendent's position.

Full of energy and ideas, Garland hit the ground running. A little more than a decade later, he was running again. This time, however, things were different. According to Garland, "I was run out of town."

Antonio Guerra

About 10 minutes into my interview with Antonio Guerra, certain well-worn cliches scrolled through my mind, cliches that seemed to fit this talented superintendent. A man on the move; tall, dark, and handsome; tough as nails. By the conclusion of the interview, I realized how accurately these sayings did, indeed, characterize Guerra.

Guerra traces his initial interest in education to a casual comment made by one of his favorite high school teachers. "Mr. Galusky called me into his office and said 'What are you going to do when you grow up?' I told him I didn't know and he suggested that I should be a teacher. I said, 'Okay.' Because I respected him so much I took his recommendation very seriously."

But after college, Guerra began his career as a juvenile probation officer. He laughs that this was excellent training for his future career in

education. He started his education career as a bilingual elementary teacher and fell in love with teaching young children. He taught for three years, then returned to the university as a full-time doctoral student. He explained that it was rare during this era for someone like him, an Hispanic from a poor mining community, to be in graduate school. After successfully completing his doctorate, he was fired up to take on new challenges.

Guerra returned to his former school district as director of federal programs. About a year later, he was asked to serve as the district's first director of bilingual education. Having put the district on the national map related to bilingual education, Guerra advanced to an interim appointment as its deputy superintendent.

A little more than three years later, Guerra crossed state lines to gain experience as an associate superintendent of school support services. He realized he needed leadership exposure in school finance and construction to balance his previous work in curriculum and instruction.

Guerra knew he wanted to be a superintendent sooner rather than later. What he didn't know was that he would get his wish in one of the most challenging urban school districts in the country. His first superintendent assignment would summon all the toughness Guerra had.

Ginny Hamilton

Some people grab your attention by not grabbing for your attention. Ginny Hamilton is one of these rare individuals. Soft-spoken and self-confident, Hamilton quietly conveys a sense of centeredness that has served her well during her career in education.

The idea of being a teacher was planted early in Hamilton's childhood memories. "My mother was an elementary teacher and I grew up playing school with my four younger siblings. Those early beginnings and watching my mother teach others convinced me that I didn't want to do anything else."

Hamilton began her teaching career as a high school English teacher. Working in a rural area with students who had few role models and low aspirations, Hamilton was ready to fail a majority of the students her

first teaching term. "Then my mother reminded me that their (the students') failure was my failure. That message has stuck with me and guided me over time. I realize that I have to measure my own success by the success of others."

After one year, Hamilton took a break from public education to complete a master's degree. She then taught English for a short time at the college level. Hamilton re-entered public education as a guidance counselor at the middle and then high school levels. Her leadership potential became apparent quickly and she began a sprint on the fast track through central-office positions. Hamilton served as an assistant to the superintendent, spent two years as an elementary principal, and headed back to central office, this time as assistant superintendent for business operations.

On the surface, Hamilton appears to have been working all along to get into the superintendent's chair as quickly as possible. In reality, planning was not part of Hamilton's vernacular. "Really, I did very little career planning. It just happened. People would approach me about a job and I would apply."

Clearly, even if Hamilton didn't have plans, others in senior positions had them for her. She established such a strong track record in her district that she was tapped to serve as interim superintendent when the superintendent decided on short notice to leave the job.

"I had some hesitations about accepting the invitation, but decided to do it for a short period of time."

The position became permanent. "I realize that this good fortune had a lot of firsts attached to it. I was female, I was African American, and I didn't have a completed doctorate at the time."

As her incredible career unfolded, Hamilton earned a national reputation for her leadership in two superintendent positions. Unfortunately, during our interview, the cumulative burden of her responsibilities was beginning to show as she discussed her future plans.

Paul Keith

Paul Keith holds the record among those I interviewed for tackling four superintendent assignments during his illustrious career in education. In contrast to many of his male colleagues, Keith wasted no motions in his career ascendency.

"The seed of being a superintendent was planted very early in my career. When I was student teaching, my supervising teacher told me that I was going to be a superintendent some day. So I decided to teach every subject I could in order to see what a student was like all the way through high school. I also felt it would give me credibility later on as a superintendent."

Keith took all the necessary steps to meet his career objective. Because state law required six years of teaching in order to qualify for an administrative preparation program, Keith packed into a six-year teaching stint exposure to students in grades 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12. Then it was time to move into administration.

In an administrative path that he labels "two years and out," Keith began as an assistant principal in a tough middle school environment. After two years he served as principal in a neighboring district — for two years. After completing a full-time doctoral program, Keith's next stop was in the central office. He was assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for, not surprisingly, two years.

With these incredibly diverse experiences behind him, Keith was ready to move further ahead. And move ahead is an understatement. Over a period of 20 years, Keith sat in the superintendent's seat in four school districts in four different states. Along the way, as his story so vividly portrays, he collected lots of awards — and many bruises.

Sue Ann Kincaid

As I introduced myself to Sue Ann Kincaid, I was greeted by a pair of very confident eyes. Some people just naturally send quiet, nonverbal messages that they know who they are and what they stand for. Kincaid is such a person.

Kincaid's early career path reads like the textbook case of a woman during her era. She completed her undergraduate degree in nursing then stayed home for 10 years raising her family. As her children got older, Kincaid completed her master's in education and began her education career as an elementary teacher.

"Many times during my first year, I felt restricted as a teacher. I thought that I needed more freedom to lead and have programs go the way I believed they should."

Not surprisingly, Kincaid acted to overcome these restrictions. While relishing several years of successful teaching, she pursued her administrative license. When the opportunity came to serve as an assistant to the superintendent, she grabbed it.

During her brief tenure as an assistant, Kincaid couldn't avoid the temptation to draw comparisons between the current superintendent's approach to leading and her own leadership style. "I thought I could do a better job. I kept thinking that the autocratic style was wrong for what needed to be accomplished."

After about three years, Kincaid left the central office to become an elementary principal, something she knew she wanted to do. As she fondly recalled that time, she told me with a broad smile, "The elementary principal position is the best job in education. Where else can you find the honesty of sweet, little peanut butter kisses? Where else do you get the daily greetings of, 'I wuv you, Ms. Kincaid'?"

But even the peanut butter kisses were not enough to hold Kincaid in the same place very long. "I knew as an elementary principal that I wanted to be a superintendent. I was impatient because I had been home for 10 years and I didn't have time to waste. I had to get going. I had a passion for the superintendency."

Next, as director of curriculum in an urban setting with about 50 percent minority students, Kincaid sharpened her skills in curriculum leadership and gained valuable experience. During those two years, restless Kincaid methodically applied for the big job. "I had a lot of interviews, but didn't land a job as superintendent. As someone reminded me, the hardest fiddle to play is second fiddle."

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Finally, after 10 years at home and about 15 years in a series of educational assignments, she proudly and confidently tackled the big job when the opportunity arose. Kincaid admits that the school district she was hired to lead was "the laughing stock of the state." In her words, the district "needed everything." But it was a place where Kincaid would spend a dozen years demonstrating her visionary leadership as superintendent. It was also a place, 12 years later, she would be eager to leave.

Yvette Metz

Yvette Metz is a curious blend of tough, smooth, and sharp. When I met her for the interview, she conveyed a down-home, make-yourself-comfortable style. Early in our conversation, though, I discovered a take-charge, take-names side of her that illustrates why she has been in charge of two highly regarded school districts and may be heading for more. As her story unfolds, Metz's record leaves no doubt about her ability to lead.

Contributing to the stereotype of little girls wanting to be teachers, Metz says she always wanted to teach. "As a child I played school with anyone who would play with me. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher and I never strayed from that."

Metz majored in education and started teaching at the elementary level right out of college. Her early years gave her firsthand exposure to diversity and poverty. Following her husband's career moves to various states, Metz taught in varied settings. At each stop along the way she demonstrated teacher leadership in school and district initiatives. Eventually, she made the transition from elementary teacher to special education teacher and then to a very successful administrative career that included positions as elementary principal, director of special education, and middle school principal. With every step up the ladder, Metz began forming a clearer picture of her long-term goal. "As principal I started thinking that I could affect a lot more kids as superintendent. So I made sure I finished my doctorate."

Metz added state department of education experience to her teaching and administrative background. After a little more than two years in the state department job, she got the opportunity to cut her superin-

tendent's teeth on an impoverished district of 15,000 students beset with major problems. Male superintendents in the surrounding area forecasted that she wouldn't last six weeks. Metz proved them wrong and had "a wonderful seven and a half years."

After she left, things weren't quite so wonderful there. The board worked with seven superintendents during the next four years; two of these packed their bags and left the day they were to be sworn in.

Derek Perkins

Early into my interview with Derek Perkins, I was struck by what seemed to be the paradoxes in his personality: a playful attitude and scholarly mind, his confidence and humility, and the twinkle in his eye and pain on his face. I sensed I was talking with someone who had been seasoned through battle. During our interview, I gained a deep appreciation for this outstanding educator with wide-ranging talents.

Before entering education, Perkins majored in music education and applied his gifts as director of music for his church. He also served as company commander in the military. The military presence stays with him today as he carries himself with pride and dignity.

Perkins' education career followed the typical path of teacher, school administrator, district administrator, and superintendent. Perkins began as a high school teacher and moved rather quickly into administration. He explained: "I got into educational administration because I saw how things were *not* getting done. Things were done more politically than educationally."

This passion for providing leadership for the right reasons, educational reasons, became a hallmark of his long, illustrious career. Perkins believes in children, and if you give him a moment, he'll seize an hour to talk about his care and concerns for public education.

Prior to becoming superintendent, Perkins accrued valuable experience in highly regarded school districts across the country. He served as principal of one of the nation's premier high schools whose graduation rate and student college placement test scores ranked among the best in the United States. This experience helped Perkins understand the ingredients necessary for high student performance.

Perkins' leadership at this school earned him national recognition and he was soon recruited to open a premier high school. Perkins said with no hesitation that this was one of the most rewarding and challenging assignments he ever faced in education.

Consistent with his tendency to take on greater challenges, Perkins jumped from the coziness of being principal in an affluent, homogeneous community to the position of associate superintendent in a district 10 times larger. He left a community where the students came to school motivated, challenged, and fully expecting to enter college upon graduation for a community where the students came to school under a court order to be desegregated within 90 days. And Perkins was in charge of making it happen.

Perkins rose to the challenge. The district successfully desegregated schools, and the model Perkins implemented became a standard for other school districts. Perkins summarized that time period succinctly. "It was a very trying experience. And very successful."

After almost 20 years apprenticing as teacher, assistant principal, principal, and associate superintendent across three states and the entire spectrum of socioeconomic conditions, Perkins eagerly accepted his first superintendent assignment. A few years and one superintendency later, a disgruntled school board eagerly accepted a buyout of his superintendent contract.

Barbara Porterhouse

Barbara Porterhouse is a talented woman who conveys her strength through her words and actions. Although somewhat cautious in demeanor, she leaves little doubt that she is anchored to a set of values she has used to plot the successful path of her career.

During her undergraduate years, Porterhouse balanced the demanding roles of full-time student, part-time worker, and full-time mother. "As I was considering medical school, my oldest son was reaching the point where he would comment, 'I'm so tired of you going to school. You are always studying.' So I decided to delay med school for a couple of years."

During that period of uncertainty about her career path, Porterhouse heeded the advice of a professor who suggested she try teaching for a little while, until she made the leap to medical school. "So I dashed into student teaching and began my career in education. And once I was in the classroom teaching science, I thought I never wanted to do anything else."

After six years of successful teaching, Porterhouse was recruited by another school district to become a school counselor. It didn't take long for those in key administrative positions to recognize her leadership potential. Soon Porterhouse was asked to serve as dean of students. And next came the call to central office. As Porterhouse demonstrated her leadership at that level, she caught the eye of the superintendent, who counseled, "You need to get a doctorate because sometime along the way in your advancing career, someone is going to raise the question."

Porterhouse followed that advice, completed her doctorate, and found herself serving as assistant superintendent. "I had the responsibility for the instructional program in 13 buildings. I thoroughly enjoyed the job and was not seeking a superintendency."

But when the superintendent position became vacant, Porterhouse was heavily recruited by several board members. "So I threw my hat in the ring. It turned out to be a very unpleasant experience." Porterhouse was one of two finalists in the district; the board selected the other finalist, an outsider. The community was outraged. "The staff was ready to march and the community was very angry. I knew I had to get out of there quickly or the new superintendent didn't have a chance."

Porterhouse later got a call to serve as superintendent in a district looking for someone extremely strong in instruction and curriculum. They knew Porterhouse could deliver. Porterhouse knew she could, too. When she joined the superintendent ranks, Porterhouse became one of only a handful of female superintendents in the state. When she withdrew from the superintendent ranks a few years later, she left behind a pair of shoes that were difficult to fill.

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Reginald Slate

My first impression of Reggie Slate was as more of a contemplative academic scholar than a harried superintendent. Tall in stature and full of personal presence, Slate conveyed pride and seriousness as he told his story.

The impression of scholar, it so happens, was on target. During his undergraduate program, Slate soaked up invaluable experience as part-time helper to the dean of the School of Education in one of the top schools in the nation. Along the way, he gained exposure to some of the brightest minds in the business. These experiences significantly influenced his career direction. "At first I didn't know if I wanted to be a doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief. But because of this early connection, I made up my mind that I wanted to be an educator."

Slate said he knew classroom experience was essential, but fully intended to head for administration as soon as possible. He wasted no time putting his career track in motion. Slate completed about two years as a high school teacher, then left this "temporary" job to return full time as a doctoral student in urban education. Next, he leapfrogged all of the customary stops along the career journey and vaulted into an assistant superintendent assignment in a school district of 300,000 students. He chuckled as he recalled the challenges awaiting him in this job. "I went from administering a book closet at the graduate school to overseeing a $15 million summer school operation full of problems."

Still in his 20s, Slate gained suburban experience in a brief stay as assistant superintendent. Then the big job opportunity appeared. Slate became a superintendent at the advanced age of 29. He held three superintendencies that spanned more than 25 years. Unfortunately, his last few years as superintendent turned out to be the longest of all.

Valerie Thomaskutty

Valerie Thomaskutty always knew she wanted to be an educator. "Probably, as most women growing up during that time, I can't remember ever *not* wanting to be a teacher. I often wonder if I grew

up in my children's era whether or not I would see things differently. But for me, the choice was clear."

Thomaskutty said that, by the luck of the draw, she was exposed as an undergraduate to some of the finest teacher training on the planet. She began her career as a 6th grade teacher. In her words, "This time period was magic. I was absolutely thrilled with my work."

As she got married, moved to different states, and added to her degrees and experience, Thomaskutty consistently found herself surrounded by talented people who influenced her professional development.

She collected experience in several creative administrative posts, beginning with one of the first combined library-media positions in her part of the country. She also served as an administrator in a school directly affiliated with a local university. This experience allowed her to sharpen her skills working with diverse constituencies and managing significant financial budgets.

Because of her strong academic credentials and even stronger inquisitive nature, it surprised no one that Thomaskutty took a hiatus from her administrative career to be a full-time doctoral student. About this time, Thomaskutty said simply: "I had a ball." But her decision to start a family forced Thomaskutty to rethink her career and her life. She accepted a temporary administrative assignment that turned out to be a valuable experience because of the mentoring she received from a superintendent. After her temporary appointment expired, Thomaskutty continued to work closely with her mentor and other superintendents as a consultant to a consortium of school districts. But, true to her nature, she became restless. This restlessness eventually led her to the superintendent's seat. From that point forward, her professional life would be perpetually without rest.

Wayne Timberland

Calm, cool, and collected. That was my immediate impression of Wayne Timberland. Through the course of our conversation, I realized that those words accurately convey his career, one marked by stability and sustained high performance.

Like many of his male colleagues, Timberland had no intention of being an educator. "I really wanted to study law and go into politics. But I realized I had to save some money, so I taught long enough to afford law school."

But year one of law school didn't go as planned. "I didn't like [it] and my mind kept drifting back to how much I enjoyed teaching. At the same time, I knew that I didn't really want to stay in the classroom."

Because he saw the endless list of needs in the school district where he'd taught, Timberland believed he could make the greatest difference in an administrative role. He switched from law to education, completed a master's degree, then a doctorate in educational administration.

As he was completing his graduate studies, Timberland started applying for principalships. Then he noticed in his home state a superintendent vacancy in a college community. "So, not thinking much would come of it, I submitted my papers. And the next thing I knew they wanted to fly me up for an interview."

After a second interview, Timberland got the job. Similar to Slate, Timberland waltzed into the superintendency at age 29, marking the start of a successful career broken only by a brief stint in higher education. And, in contrast to so many of his colleagues, Slate was blessed to serve for almost 20 years as superintendent in an educational environment characterized by the same words I use to characterize him: calm, cool, and collected.

Louis Zartow

From the very beginning of my interview with Louis Zartow, I sensed I was having a conversation with a well-worn warrior. He looked tired, with a hint of defeat underneath his outward demeanor of humility. As we traced his career path, it became clear that tired, defeat, and humility were not part of Zartow's vocabulary during most of his impressive career.

Zartow began his career in elementary education. As a young teacher he gained invaluable experience and insights negotiating teacher contracts. "At that time, I was feeling pretty good about myself and I

decided that the elementary principal, whom I admired, put his pants on the same way I did. In other words, I knew that I could do the job as well as he." And he did.

At the age of 27, Zartow accepted an elementary principal appointment in a neighboring district. Never satisfied with the status quo, he left the principalship after two years and headed south to enroll in a doctoral program.

As part of this academic program, Zartow completed an internship with the superintendent of one of the nation's largest urban school districts. He parlayed this rich experience into an appointment as director of elementary education, supervising 100 elementary schools. This hefty assignment caused Zartow to blink, but only briefly. Even though he had just two years of previous elementary administrative experience and about five years of teaching experience, Zartow knew he could do the job. And he did, with distinction.

But Zartow had his eyes on bigger and better things, including the biggest job of all, an urban superintendency. He decided he should log some seat time in the deputy position. After three years of central-office experience, one of the state's highly respected school districts recruited him to serve as deputy superintendent. He held that post for about three years. Then what appeared to be the opportunity of a lifetime knocked at his door, and he answered.

Zartow and his family relocated across the country when he became superintendent of a major, urban school district. With this decision, he launched a rollercoaster ride of more than 20 years as superintendent in districts widely regarded as the most challenging in the nation. It was a ride of incredible highs and monumental lows.

After the superintendents shared stories about the career paths that led them to the superintendent's doorstep, I asked them what it was like after they walked through the door into their first assignment at the top of the organizational chart. What I expected was a methodical,

blow-by-blow account of how each superintendent took on the tough issues, battled the opposing forces, and, despite some setbacks and lingering scars, eventually prevailed in moving the districts ahead. What I heard was something else.

As I listened to the superintendents reminisce individually about the time they spent in the top slot, I was struck by the commonality of their stories, which could be summed up by the old Clint Eastwood movie title: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Each superintendent talked enthusiastically about good times — times when they tackled tough problems with the support of the board and community. But for most, the erosion of board support — the bad — led to frustrations great and small that piled up along the way. And while each painted a picture that included significant accomplishments and personal pride, each picture included some moving snapshots of the ugly toll the superintendency takes on the soul — a toll that has two major dimensions. The first dimension is the personal toll the job takes on the superintendents themselves. But, as I listened to their words and observed their emotions, I realized that what is really difficult — the truly ugly — is the toll this job has had on many of their families.

Chapter 2

The Good: Dealing With Tough Issues by Doing What's Right

When the superintendents reflected on their first days as superintendent and how it was walking into some real messes, their memories had a common theme: "Sure it was tough. But I was tough and the district was tough. We did what had to be done to wade through the muck so we could come out of it in a better place." All recalled fondly times when they felt they were doing difficult but valuable work. Some of the superintendents spoke of good times during their first five years as superintendent. For others, the good times lasted a dozen years or more. And, regardless of whether or not things eventually turned sour, each superintendent experienced and cherished the time when, though the problems were tough, so was the resolve to fix them.

Virtually all of the superintendents were hired specifically to take on major, complex problems insidiously tangled in a web of district history woven long before their arrival. Segregation issues and white flight. Highly politicized communities divided along Democrat versus Republican party lines. Declining enrollments and the accompanying need to close schools. Dramatic drops in student achievement. Huge

budget shortfalls resulting from changes in state law. The superintendents faced these and many other challenges as they walked through the door for the first time.

As I asked about the barriers they encountered and their struggles to move ahead in the face of adversity, the superintendents' memories can be summed up succinctly: "Sure there were problems. But there were also solutions." Almost everyone recalled a period — the good times — when the leadership charged ahead without lingering damage to the district or to themselves as superintendents.

Kincaid faced the emotionally charged challenge of redrawing attendance boundaries for a large segment of the student population. As she recounted this time she said, "It went very smoothly. I laid the groundwork so that other people thought it was their idea." Developing buy in was the key to successfully accomplishing this often stressful task without harming community sentiment about the schools.

Within the first few months on the job, Perkins was forced to deal with racial tensions. "I was never trained to deal with the animosity of white people toward desegregation. One morning I arrived at my office and was greeted by a shotgun blast through the office window. Another time I encountered the rage of a white redneck with a bulge in his pocket. He was packing a gun and was carrying a lot of baggage about desegregation."

Perhaps dozens of years mellowed the memory, but as Perkins reflected on those tough times, he was able to see that, though the parents may have been misguided, their intentions were noble. "There was negativism for positive reasons. Parents wanted to do the best they could for their own children." He remembers with pride working through these issues successfully.

Along similar lines, Garland faced a highly politicized community with a history of bad blood between Republicans and Democrats. "My task

was to depoliticize as much as possible, without aligning myself in one camp or the other. So we focused on kids, programs, and staff development."

When asked about the barriers encountered when moving the district toward stronger programs and away from political discord, Garland was quick to say, "There really weren't significant barriers. People knew what needed to be done so we just dealt with it. We sat down, I looked the naysayers straight in the eye and said, 'Here are the facts; here is what we're doing,' and they said 'okay.' Truly, it wasn't painful to pull off." He remembers confronting the tough issues during his introduction to the superintendency as a time of forward motion without a lot of backsliding.

One of Zartow's major issues hit quickly and with a powerful punch. Recalled Zartow, "I was in the fields pheasant hunting. I had this nagging feeling that I should call the office and when I did, the news was not good. We had a major financial crisis. The price of oil had dropped from $40 to $10 a barrel and we're an oil state. So for the next eight years, we had to construct budgets with less revenue each year!"

Zartow's leadership strategy was straightforward. "I told the staff and the community we had to do more with less. And we did. It wasn't easy, of course. We reduced our staff dramatically, from 27 supervisors to 7 in central office, and we had to cut 227 teachers over this period. The most traumatic action was the closing of a high school. The night of the board meeting at which cuts were to be made, the teachers blocked the driveway to the board building and they filled the board room. But there were no ugly remarks. People were professional in their behavior because they knew tough decisions had to be made. It was the reality of the time."

Upon her arrival to the district, Hamilton disaggregated student test data and discovered a textbook case of bimodal performance. According to Hamilton, "The white children were high achieving, high income. The black children were poor, and poorly achieving. It painted an ugly picture."

"At first," said Hamilton, "most people went into the denial stage, [refusing to believe] that anything was wrong. Predictably, there was some anger because we exposed the facts that in that fine district not everything was perfect. But once we got beyond the fear that the issue was going to destroy the district, the community acknowledged that we needed to address this open secret. So we set forth to make sure the students got the resources needed. Strategies were implemented to communicate with the board and to create a task force charged with coming up with recommendations to close the achievement gap."

Hamilton reflects on this period as a time when the community, the staff, and the board pulled together rather than being pulled apart over such an explosive issue.

When Metz walked into her second superintendency, she walked into a mess. "I discovered we faced major cutbacks due to changes in state laws. So there I was as an outsider waltzing into a very tight culture ... two cultures (me and them) coming together to see how we're going to work together. We had to face the financial facts that it was going to hurt deeply, to the point that we had to cut $31 million from the operating budget the first year. This amounted to almost 20 percent of the total budget."

In Metz's memory, this daunting challenge was handled logically and without a lot of rancor. "We created budget teams for major program areas, then met with each team separately and charged them with responding to the following question: Do we want this program to continue? If the answer is 'no', you can adjourn the committee and go home. If the answer is 'yes,' you have an intense 2 ½ months ahead of you during which you will need to design the kind of program, the budget, and the revenue sources to fund the program."

As Metz looked back on this tumultuous period, she recalled that each team not only accepted the challenge willingly, but created rich, viable solutions to keep the program areas alive in the face of dire budget conditions.

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The Elements of Good

In some ways, as I listened to the superintendents reminisce about the good times, I felt like I was sitting at the feet of wise storytellers as they took delight in remembering the way things used to be. I was struck by how often they gave major credit for their success to the support they received from the school board. As they reflected on this support, they described it rather simply: no nonsense, no politics, and no doubt about the professionalism of the superintendent. Listening to them talk about overcoming challenges early on, it became clear that to succeed, a superintendent needs a board with three important characteristics: a supportive president, a strong board nucleus, and stable board composition.

A Supportive President

Almost without exception, the superintendents asserted that their success during the good times can be traced directly to board support. They were quick to praise the board in general and the board president in particular for enabling them to successfully weather the storms they faced.

Kincaid said of her first seven years: "Sure, we had expulsions and tough decisions, but they were absolutely routine. When you know the board is behind you, you are not afraid to take risks and do things.

"The board president was on my side all of the way. In fact, the support was unbelievable. We talked almost every day. Even when a board member would raise his voice at me, the board president would say, 'That's not the way we talk to our superintendent.'"

A Strong Board Nucleus

As Zartow reconstructed the early years of his first two superintendencies, he recalled being "blessed with a good board. In my first job, the board had the courage to close a high school in a very wealthy area. If the board had not had the courage to close that one, we would not have been able to close any of the rest. We did have one antagonist on the board. But she caused the other board members to pull together."

In Zartow's view, closing the school in the face of strong opposition by some of the community's most influential movers and shakers sent a strong message that the board was not going to be swayed by politics. The board was going to act in what it considered to be the overall best interests of the community.

Keith recounted with a smile what happened during a board meeting when a chronic malcontent board member boasted that he marched to his own drummer. "Another board member turned to him and said, 'That's okay to do. But couldn't we at least keep in earshot of each other so we can hear each other's drums?'

"Similarly, when another board member tried to wreak havoc with board direction, the other board members didn't argue with him or create a public scene. They simply didn't vote for his issues." As a result, important things could get done.

Stable Board Composition

Twelve years with very little board turnover allowed Slate and his board to move ahead on important initiatives they developed together. "I have a chart on my desk that shows the board stability. Having quality people and those who were politically astute made my job easier. In fact, good board relations helped me *and the district* get through the tough times. I can say with confidence that things went well during the first 12 years!"

Hamilton summarized succinctly how important board relations are to superintendents. "If the board had not supported me through [the] tough issues, I probably would have been fired. The issues were so explosive and created such turmoil in the community, I could *not* have survived them without board support!"

Garland explained how working with a stable board made for stable board-staff relationships. "We had strong mutual respect for each other. We held board and senior staff retreats." Leaning back in his chair, he looked away and wistfully said in a voice barely audible, "Those were good years."

Given the superintendent's strong, uniform perceptions of how crucial board support is to superintendent success, it's no wonder things get rough when the sands of support begin to shift.

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Chapter 3

The Bad: Putting Rocks in Your Pockets

Between the time of my interviews and the time this book headed to press (approximately two years), the job status of the superintendents I interviewed had changed dramatically. Two of the people I interviewed were already retired from the superintendency when I interviewed them; the other 12 were still sitting in the superintendent's chair. Two years later, only 4 of the active superintendents (including 3 of the 6 women interviewed) still sat in the same chair. The remaining 8 superintendents had not only vacated their seats, but had chosen not to pursue another superintendency in another district. In other words, over a 2-year period, 75 percent of the active superintendents I had interviewed left the superintendency altogether.

As each superintendent told his or her own personal story about what happens when board support erodes, the tone of our conversations dramatically shifted. I could see and feel the energy drain. And while the details of the stories differ, the central theme of each story is the same: the anguish of leadership. It led me to recall advice I once overheard a veteran superintendent offering to a rookie.

"David, I can tell you really love your job. I think that's great! I also feel obliged to offer advice from an old codger who made several mistakes along the way. The advice is simple: Watch out for rocks in your pocket. If you're doing your job right, eventually you will start accumulating rocks in your pocket from alienating certain groups or individuals because you can't please all of the people all of the time.

"As you gather the rocks, no single rock may seem at the time particularly heavy ... although I've been known to collect a few boulders right on the spot. Anyway, as you collect the rocks in your pocket, the cumulative weight will start to take you under. Don't make the mistake I made. I didn't read the signs and I have paid the price personally and professionally.

"My strongest advice," the old codger went on to say, "is to read the signs. As a superintendent, recognize when you start to put rocks in your pocket. Read the signs, feel the weight, and get out before the rocks become boulders and pull you down with no hope of getting back up."

The veteran superintendent had just been fired by his board. He suffered from Bells palsy, his face was drawn on the right side, and he had no significant retirement income. He understood about having rocks in your pockets.

I shared this story with the superintendents and asked them what they thought about its message. Looking back on their careers, each could pinpoint many times they picked up rocks along the way. For 12 of the 14 superintendents, these rocks were too much to bear when the sands of board support began shifting.

The Erosion of Board Support

Just as the superintendents sang the praises of supportive school boards, they bemoaned the erosion of board support, which seems too often to be inevitable. Based on the superintendents' stories, the

general pattern of erosion starts with a change in school board president. Then, over time, or sometimes very quickly, the strong board nucleus crumbles as new school board members are elected. Finally, the superintendent awakes to find that the seated board is quite different from the one that conducted the superintendent search.

The turning point in Thomaskutty's first superintendency came when a rabid person who could not get elected as a Democrat turned Republican and won. "This person happened to be an administrator I forced into retirement. ... At that point, I was still carrying the board on a 7-2 vote. There were six Democrats and three Republicans. The next election gained one more Republican. This happened to be a person I had had to terminate as an employee. She made it clear she was looking for revenge."

To make matters worse, the board member in question was elected board president. According to Thomaskutty, this scenario is not unique to her or her district. "What happened in this district is happening all over the country."

And it's not just the superintendent who suffers when boards are unstable. At the time of our interview, Slate, in his third superintendent assignment, was feeling the power of partisan politics in his district. Speaking about the most recent election, he said, " . . . the board chair aligned himself with the most conservative element of the city council. He challenged the mayor, who is the one who determines our district's budget. This polarized the board. So, for the first time, in this district we have the Republican position on test scores and the Democrat position on test scores."

In addition to party politics, most of the superintendents strongly believe that board-superintendent relations are all too often adversely affected by the turnover of board presidents.

When Kincaid talked about her encounter with board shifts, she paused as if to compose herself and chose her words carefully.

"Things started shifting for me in November of the ninth year I was superintendent in this district, when the board president decided to retire after 28 years of being president. The new board president was the former vice president and demonstrated zero leadership skills. He also felt he had a responsibility to give the board more freedom,

because he believed that the former president managed the board too tightly. What happened next was something that my husband reminds me I predicted." But apparently it still took Kincaid by surprise.

"There were subtle things at first. No civility, no politeness. Board members would say rude things publicly to me and the business manager. For example, when I had to give the board different figures relative to budget calculations because of changing calculations at the state level, board members accused the administration of trying to trick them.

"The board environment also shifted from a professionally run meeting to a free-for-all where anyone can say anything on any topic. Each board member has his or her own issue. ... The board takes whatever a community member says in the grocery store as the gospel, then comes to the board meeting and accuses the administration of not telling the truth.

"For instance, one of the board members bumped into a substitute bus driver at the grocery store. The bus driver whined that he didn't have rosters of all of the children on the bus. He went on to complain that the one day he did get it, the print was too small to read. So at the next board meeting, the public board debate began with 'Why don't we give rosters to bus drivers' and ended with the accusation that 'We aren't treating the transportation contractor well.'"

Keith also spoke thoughtfully about the stress of working with an unstable board.

"After my second month on the job, the board president handed me a list of 20 things to get done in a month and said he would have a similar list for the second month. Keep in mind this was his own list, not the board's. Eventually it created a rift between the board president and the rest of the board. Trying to get consensus from seven different board members with seven different agendas was extremely difficult."

Perkins' relationship with the board in his third superintendency began to change with a major flap over prayer. "I said it was illegal to

pray at football games. The uproar led to a mass meeting of the community where community members degraded a board member. The board member resigned that night and the board president resigned the next morning. Two new board members were appointed. After the first meeting of the new board, one of the board members said to me, 'the teachers want you to resign.'

"This was a surprise to me. [I told her so and] said 'You get back to me and tell me what the concerns are.' I never heard another word from her. Next, some board members were complaining about a principal. Again I checked into it and it seemed that the principal was doing a good job. I never heard another word about this issue, either." As Perkins talked about the erosion of board support, it was clear that the accumulation of accusations gathered momentum until he was asked to leave his job. No single issue appeared to be a major one. But the combined weight eventually took him down.

For Guerra, the struggle over governance and leadership control became the undoing of positive board relationships. "When we passed a huge bond referendum, the community made me a star. But it backfired. The board, particularly the president, became jealous and decided it needed to take charge. The board president was a strong leader but had a checkered past in the community. However, he understood power and control. For example, he decided he wanted to reorganize the district by creating an organizational structure with three associate superintendents and he told me who he wanted.

"So we spent six months arguing over appropriate roles. He had four of the seven board votes. He told me that it didn't matter what I thought because he had a majority of the board behind him. This behavior effectively shut down the district for six months. Regardless of what I did, the board did what *they* wanted to do."

Metz suffered the pain of bad blood between herself and the board in year two of her first superintendency. In one evening, the school board elected officers and the board chair was displaced. The new board took swift action. "I'll never forget that board meeting. The

board put me out of executive session. They even put their own attorney out. We sat in the hallway for hours. Then the board emerged at 2:30 a.m., fired several people, non-renewed all administrators, and chose not to extend my contract. Because they dismissed their own board attorney from the meeting, they ended up making decisions that legally they had to retract.

"I told the board they could do what they chose with my contract, but they needed to maintain leadership in the schools. So the board reinstated the administrators but did not extend my contract. It was the first time that anything like that had ever happened to me."

Thomaskutty minced no words when she drew connections between superintendent tenure and board composition. "The shift in length of superintendent tenure is easy to trace: the dwindling supply of good board people. Nobody wants to do this [the superintendents'] job anymore because of the time commitment and the political entanglements."

She went on to argue that, in the past, potential board candidates with bad agendas weren't allowed to surface. But conditions have changed. "Now, with the dwindling pool of talented people serving on boards, like the clowns I've got, talented people don't want to step forward [to serve in the superintendent's role]."

The message delivered by most of the superintendents is consistent and clear: It's not a question about whether or not board support will change. It's a question of when. And keep in mind that this message is not delivered by a group of mediocre, whining superintendents. These are highly respected school district leaders who achieved success in the very districts where board support started strong but ultimately decayed.

When the Last Rock Is a Boulder

As these superintendents relentlessly worked on tough school district issues during their careers, they pounded out an enviable track record. As mentioned earlier, these individuals have collected a stack of plaques and honors they richly deserve. In their minds, however,

this success was tempered by the accumulating anguish of the job. Several of them talked openly and emotionally about the defining last issues that became their downfall in certain jobs.

Perkins enjoyed a rich, distinguished career in some of the nation's most challenging districts. He successfully weathered the early years and took on an even more complex assignment in this third superintendency. Perkins had his share of ups and downs, but he wasn't really prepared for the final "downer."

Although many accusations were hurled and whispered about Perkins' demise, he is convinced that the central issue was a political one. The school board had a baseball coach they wanted to hire who was a graduate of the high school and an all-state player at the time. But the individual had worked in numerous places, sported a losing record, and was not (in Perkins' judgment) a good choice for the slot. Board-superintendent relationships heated up following Perkins' stand on the coach decision.

"At a routine board meeting, there was a motion made to bring in an attorney to resolve a personnel matter. When everybody started leaving, I turned to the board president and asked if there was something I should know about. The board member said, 'Yes, we want to negotiate a settlement to your contract. We don't want you to talk to us. Talk to our attorney.'"

As Perkins told this story, his pain showed even as he tried to maintain composure. "Ten days later, on a Thursday morning, I got a phone call from the board president wanting to meet at noon. ... At about 10 minutes before noon, the press arrived. The president called the meeting to order, read a one-page resolution that the board had approved saying they were placing me on leave and naming the assistant superintendent as acting superintendent, effective immediately."

The board assigned Perkins to a nonexistent job that kept him on payroll for a year but out of the superintendency until the end of his negotiated contract. Perkins said seeing people on the street who were paying taxes to fund his paycheck was humiliating and degrading.

Prior to our interview, Kincaid had logged almost 10 successful years in her district. But January of year 10 is a time she doesn't like to think about.

"Some members of the community asked for a meeting with the board to talk about the football program. Our district did not have a football program and, until the issue popped up, no one had asked for a football program. But after the presentation by the special interest group, things turned chaotic.

"The football group demanded that the board vote in March on the status of the football program and, in effect, the board said 'Aye, aye sir!' Generally, it takes the board and community years to study something. Yet, in this little, bitty district the board agreed in two months to spend $800,000 a year with no knowledge of where to get this money."

At face value, this issue may not seem significant to other superintendents who deal with many complex crises. The important message, though, is that the defining measure of whether the issue is a pebble or a boulder in your pocket cannot be gauged by sheer weight and size alone. Tiny pebbles in huge districts can look like boulders to small-district superintendents. Kincaid felt a heavy burden as she tried unsuccessfully to maintain some semblance of order over such a volatile issue.

"The last five or six months we have been consumed by this issue. TV stations have sensationalized things. A lot of the community has seen the board in a different light to the point that the community is talking about starting a write-in campaign for candidates.

"The turmoil has hurt me inside. It's different. The fun is out of it." At the time of our interview, Kincaid was shopping around for another district where fun was still part of the job description.

Garland served his district proudly for over a dozen years. The boulder that took him under was one that hung around for a long time. When we spoke, he was finishing the final year of his superintendency in that district.

"We had a major issue of management of the capital improvement program. We got into a situation where costs started going up. The combination of rising expectations for what we needed and limited budgets to deliver put us in the situation where we couldn't fill all of the promises being made. It has just snowballed . . . . It's been a really hard three or four years for me.

"I still remember a board meeting where I had to publicly tell the board we were not going to proceed with a capital project. It was a combination of poor estimating plus the board looking at plans and saying we want more of this and this. . . . I remember saying to the board, 'Not only can we not do this with the current project as planned; we are not going to be able to do some of the things we thought we could do previously.'

"This became a landmark for me and the board. The newspapers picked up on it and hammered on it for two or three years. We were hammered on mismanagement and poor planning."

This constant hammering forced Garland to confront the inevitable. It was time to leave. "It's one thing to get run out of town if you've only been in the job three or four years. It's another thing to get run out of town when you've been in the job as long as I have. Practically 80 percent of the staff I have appointed and am tied to. So there is a big emotional investment in the people and this transition is very hard."

Ultimately, Garland had to weigh whether or not to stay and fight or to leave. "It's not worth the fight on a personal level and it's not worth the fight in terms of the potential image of the institution. So, I announced about a year ago that I would be leaving a year from now."

At the time of our interview, Porterhouse had already accepted another superintendency for the next year. A string of incidents in which she was harassed by board members about what she refers to as "ridiculous" matters became the boulder that took her down. She shared with me a concrete episode that illustrated, in her words, "just how ridiculous this has been."

"A couple of years ago, we had purchased a new Christmas tree in our office because the old tree was too big for the space. Recently, a board member came into my office and said, 'That Christmas tree that was here two years ago . . . it is at some administrator's house now, isn't it?'

"I responded by saying that I didn't remember what happened to the tree but I would check."

The school district secretary reminded Porterhouse that her office sent a message to the board members saying that they were discarding the old tree and invited board members to notify her if anyone wanted it. She remembered that there was no response. When the maintenance person was taking out the trash he told Porterhouse that his sister had four children and didn't have a tree and asked if he could possibly take the tree to her. Porterhouse said, "Fine, no problem." And the maintenance person took it away.

After Porterhouse got back to the board member with the story, the board member accused her of having the maintenance person take the tree to her house.

The board member even called the maintenance person to check out Porterhouse's story. The maintenance person said he gave it to his sister because she didn't have a Christmas tree. Then he promised to go get the tree and bring it back because he was scared to death he had done something wrong and would lose his job.

"We even called in the auditors to verify that everything was clear and clean. But this stuff just went on and on. . . ," said Porterhouse, who noted that board members even bragged about harassing her about it to the point she said, "Enough is enough. I'm leaving."

Outsiders looking in may not understand how an episode with a Christmas tree can become so pivotal. The truth is, the public, and even district employees, often do not have a clue why board-superintendent relations are strained. It was clear with the superintendents I interviewed that these proud individuals feel a deep responsibility to buffer others from the anguish they privately endure.

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When I interviewed Zartow, he had logged a few successful years in his second superintendency, but was getting pressure from some board members who were getting pressure from developers to build more schools and build them faster. In fact, said Zartow, a local real estate developer stood up at a Rotary meeting and made his wants known: "It's time for the superintendent to leave. We need new leadership."

According to Zartow, "In the next day's morning paper, the developer was quoted. I chose not to say anything because if you get into a peeing match with a skunk you are going to lose. The mayor, who was Republican, was also quoted in the paper saying he was going to come to my office and give me my report card.

"Indeed, the reporters followed him to my office. I told them that if there was a concern with my performance, I was a big boy and I could take it. Two days later, the mayor called again and offered to buy out my contract."

As painful as it was for Zartow to discuss this dramatic end to an otherwise memorable career, he struggled to remain philosophical. "Even though letters to the editor were 100 to 1 in favor of me, I've been around long enough to know that the train has left the station and it's not going to stop. It's only a matter of when, not if..." Then, appearing somewhat shaken by hearing his own words describing this agonizing period, Zartow posed a rhetorical question to me, "How much blood has to be let in the streets for the school system and everyone else involved? I simply told the community groups who were going to bat for me that it was not in the best interests of the community or the district to fight it."

Like many of his colleagues, Slate spent most of his administrative career accumulating positive memories. But his first and last superintendency ended in the midst of tense board-superintendent relations. Slate recounted the pivotal issue in his initial superintendent assignment:

"One of the teachers chaperoned a student trip during which the teacher condoned students joining in a nude sauna experience. I

tried to terminate the teacher and the board wouldn't do it. The same teacher chaperoned another student trip six months later and a student drowned. In this case, the teacher used questionable judgment of supervision and I tried to terminate the teacher again. This time the board just suspended him. It was becoming clear to me that the board was getting squirrely in a hurry."

Squirrely boards were not Slate's idea of fun, so he moved on. Unfortunately, he crashed into a different boulder during the last months of his last superintendency. He winces as he describes the defining blow.

"I asked the board if they were willing to support me on the need to move some principals. They said, 'go for it. We're behind you 9-0.' The night of the board vote, we had 400 people show up at the meeting and all hell broke loose.

"The mayor came to the meeting, walked up on stage, and announced that the city council had just voted to instruct the board to instruct the superintendent to pull the agenda item about transferring principals. When the board meeting resumed, the board chair announced, 'We just got some new information from the city council. I move to ask the superintendent to reconsider his request.'"

Slate remembers vividly that the vote was four Republicans for the motion and four Democrats against the motion; one Republican abstained.

"The mayor told the abstention not to expect to be nominated again at the next election. I withdrew the recommendation and the next day sent a memo to staff that said, 'The logic of the transfers has been lost in a sea of politics and emotion. The board support that was there unanimously is not there now.'"

The newspapers announced to the world that Slate was wishy-washy. He even began to doubt his own abilities.

"I thought maybe I wasn't cut out to be a superintendent after all. The support I had for the first seven years began to change, and I had to ask myself what's wrong around here? I realized that the school board who hired me to straighten out the mess got off the board as I completed the tasks they hired me for. There was a return to the self-

minded board. I had one opposition, then two, then three. I was not going to wait for the fourth opposition to happen."

Keith was at the peak of his career as he accepted his fourth superintendency in a high-profile school district. The peak turned out to be just that . . . and it was downhill fast for someone regarded as one of the finest superintendents in the nation.

In the spring of year three, the rocks started to pile up as the board became more intent on micromanaging. "Finally, I told the board that they could not continue to do business that way. They responded by saying that they liked what I was doing but they wanted me to get rid of some administrators. ... [T]he board wanted me to get rid of the high school principal who had only been there two years and the middle school principal who had only been there two years. They even started discussing how we were going to write plans to document things about the high school and middle school principals."

The board's actions pushed Keith to the point of bluntness as he explained to the board that that was not their job and warned that they were going to tear the organization apart. Then, according to Keith, "I had the big shock. The board told me that I was going to have to resign or they were going to do an investigation and fire me.

"The board had offered me a new three-year contract two weeks before this conversation. And suddenly I felt that I had failed. The whole world seemed to come down on me at that moment. As much as I would like to think I could solve all of the problems of the world, I had to face the fact that this (job) was not going to work.

"The most heart-breaking thing of all was the fear that spread through the organization when the board suspended me with pay, pending an investigation. People said, 'My God, if they can do this to you, then they can do this to anyone.'

"So everyone dived for cover and tried to survive. It was a bitter pill for me to have to swallow."

Even though big boulders and bitter pills were part of the norm for most of the superintendents I interviewed, two of the leaders I met were more fortunate. Indeed, Brown's chronicle of his career as superintendent is a textbook case of success. During his first 10 years in the superintendency, Brown reported, "There never was a time when I thought I was in trouble in the district."

He added somewhat apologetically, "I realize I was blessed."

After 10 years as superintendent, Brown said that things got even better. "It was about then when we were starting to see results. Academic achievement was increasing. Turnover was down. The union was behind us; the community was behind us. We had the lowest dropout rate in 25 years. Every time one of our schools was recognized, we got even better . . . the self-fulfilling prophecy." Brown's story is an encouraging one to those aspiring to lead schools and school systems.

And as Timberland told the personal story of his career, I wished that all who chose this noble profession could have such good fortune.

"We have one of the most affluent districts in the country. We have extremely low dropout rates, every high school department has a secretary. In the middle and elementary schools there is a secretary for every seven or eight teachers. Teachers have no non-teaching duties.

"So it's like being in heaven as far as a place to teach. Classes are small. When teachers get here, they stay. We have the highest pay scale in the state."

Timberland talked with pride about his strong working relationship with the union. He recalled that they went a stretch of about 13 years without a grievance from the union.

And he talked with even greater pride about his relationship with the school board. He explained that his board members are extremely professional and represent some of the most high-profile individuals in the United States. "The board never meets in June, July, or August. We only meet once in December." Timberland then said with a tinge of embarrassment, "In the last 10 years as superintendent, I can't remember too many board meetings going beyond one hour."

But after talking about his good fortune, Timberland said soberly, "You need to know, though, that as I talk with my colleagues (superintendents), if I had to put up with some of the nonsense and crap they have to put up with, it would be a different story for me."

And so the story goes.

Chapter 4

The Ugly: The Human Toll of Leadership

Without a doubt, all the superintendents I interviewed possess incredible resilience. Their stories are strong testimony to the strength of their resolve in weathering the *bad* along with the *good* times. But my conversations also made it clear that they, understandably, got worn down by the *ugly* part of the job—its personal toll on them and those they love.

The Heavy Personal Toll

As we've discussed, most of the superintendents radiated energy, enthusiasm, and confidence during their early years on the job. But this excitement was tempered over time by the erosion of support and feelings of ineffectiveness. Zartow graphically described the plight of most superintendents, "For every superintendent, there is a period of ascendancy, plateau, and descendance. As superintendent, every day you die a little. It takes a toll on you." The toll was most noticeable on those who were ending their careers or, more accurately, on those who were having their careers ended for them.

For Garland, the stress of being a school leader took a very tangible form. While talking about the rocks in his pockets, he said, "Speaking of rocks in your pocket, I had a heart attack a year ago. I would say *that* is a rock. That was a defining event for me. It was a real shot across the bow. A message that it was time to get out. The pressures had built up tremendously. As the doctor told me, there was no physical reason I should have had the attack."

"Over the years, I had to fire some principals and make other tough decisions. So the dissidents just kept chipping away. They got quoted in the newspaper regularly. A couple of newspapers really had a lot of fun with it. When you give critics an opening, they will try to beat the crap out of you. The moral of this story is that if you're going to do anything as a leader, over time you are going to step on some toes. And if you give some of your critics any little opening, they will run a train through it."

"Five years ago, I could have articulated very clearly that it's smart to get out before that happens to you. It's another thing to recognize when it is actually happening and to have the kind of options to get out at an appropriate time . ... You get family concerns, working wives, and grandchildren that become pulls against moving on."

Garland looks back on the tough times and laments, "In retrospect, it would have been smarter for me, personally, three years ago to say 'the handwriting is on the wall ... it's time to get out.' But I've gone through another three years."

Garland summed up the personal impact of staying: "You get pissed off, you try to get better; you try to ask yourself whether you are being coopted. You get defensive, you draw into a shell, you insulate yourself."

"I wish I had made the decision [to leave] three years earlier. But I didn't!"

The stress of the job manifested itself physically for Zartow as well. "I started to have blood pressure problems and started letting the job get to me emotionally. My wife and daughters could see it happening. I was coming home, pouring myself a drink or two, trying to unwind that way ... trying to think about what options I had.

"I went to see the doctor and told him that I was being affected by the stresses . . . waking up at 3 a.m. worrying about what was going to happen the next day. The doctor put me on medication.

"As I talked with colleagues who had been through what I experienced, one colleague superintendent said, 'I used to think that I understood what went on in the superintendent's office because I sat right next to the superintendent's office for 14 years. But I realized after I sat in the superintendent's seat for a half day that I didn't know what it was like until I sat there. It's very lonely.'

"I kept searching for answers. I found that I wasn't willing to put up with some of the bull like I used to . . . I was watching the end of my time come up, trying to hang on until age 62. And I was making compromising decisions, rather than providing the kind of leadership that I did in my younger days. A lot of the fire was gone." Indeed, soon the fire was extinguished. The board bought out his contract and assigned him to a token consultant job.

Even those who at the time of our interview did not see an immediate end to their career talked about the sting of the job on them personally. "We buffer the issues and act like it's not affecting us as much as it does," said Hamilton. " We think we're dying inside and others comment on how well we are holding up. I guess we learn to mask what's truly going on."

As an ethnic minority superintendent, Guerra added that it is particularly "hard to get used to when your own ethnic members in the community on the board are those who are trying to get rid of you. I believe you have to listen for the hoofs beating so you know when it's time to move on. If you are doing your job, it's tough to stay in these positions very long. I would like to time my exit so I don't stay too long." Indeed, within a few months of our meeting, he left the superintendency with a defined exit plan jointly constructed with the board so there were no hard feelings.

The Painful Toll on Family

As I talked to the superintendents about the human toll of the job, it was clear that the hardest part of all — even harder than dealing with heart attacks or high blood pressure, sleepless nights and feelings of inadequacy — was watching the toll this high-profile job can have on family members.

Guerra became animated when the conversation shifted to his family. "I've always said, you can do anything you want to me but don't hurt my family. And you know ... that's nice to say, but it doesn't work that way."

Guerra leaned forward in his chair and locked his eyes onto mine. "They do hurt your family. Our home life is open (for public inspection) where any glimpse of our personal life is used against me. They've hurt my son and daughter as students in the school district. They've hurt my wife as someone who has a tough job being a superintendent's spouse. My wife has had to endure tremendous hardships, even worrying about who she can be friends with. And when she does become friends with someone, they use that for their own personal vendettas. These are high prices you pay and it's a high-stakes game."

Perkins described with anger written all over his face how his son found out when he got fired. "The day after the night the board told me about my nonrenewal, my son was in school as usual. Because of the late board meeting, I had not seen him before he left for school.

"It so happened that [my son] was sick with a virus and evidently was very quiet in class. One of the students was concerned about him and asked what was wrong. The daughter of a former board member yelled out, 'He must have gone to the board meeting last night and saw what the board did to his dad.'"

With fire in his eyes, Perkins banged his fist on the table. "This occurred before any announcement had been made. I was so mad that I thought about whipping the board member's ... "

Slate summarized his own survey of the personal toll of being superintendent: "Of all of the superintendents who were here (in this region) eight years ago, half of them are gone and half of them are divorced. Only 2 of 13 superintendents are both still here and still married to the same person they were 8 years ago."

As one superintendent said with tears in his eyes: "I get paid the big bucks to take the abuses of this job. My wife and children don't get paid a penny for the abuse they endure."

A Soft Place

The superintendents expressed deep appreciation for the unwavering support flowing from family members. Keith spoke directly about his wife's contribution. "As I got suspended and it was going to end in a not very pretty way, my wife's anger was a lot healthier than the depression that I was feeling. I remember telling her one day, 'I feel like I'm in a hole and I'm looking over the edge but I can't get out of it.'

She said, 'I know, I can see that. If you could just get angry you would be a lot better off. I am really concerned for you.'

"Within a few weeks, watching her get angry gave me permission to be angry too."

Zartow also spoke about the power of the support he received from his wife and other family members. "If it weren't for my wife and children, I couldn't have made it this far. As my wife has reminded me, 'It's not worth it. We started from scratch before and we can do it again.' She doesn't like what she sees it doing to me."

Even those superintendents whose children were grown and whose spouses' jobs were less of a factor realized how easily it could have been much tougher for them.

"Since I got into this after my children were raised," said Kincaid, "it hasn't been difficult. I don't think I could do this if I had little children or a new marriage."

Porterhouse's spouse was near retirement in his own career and that took some pressure off her when she felt the pressures to move on. "It was fortunate that my husband had some flexibility. I have a much better understanding now of why some superintendents tolerate harassment in their assignments. If I had children in college at this stage and had major financial obligations that caused me fear over losing my job, it would have been a very, very difficult stress on me and my family."

I came away from these interviews with the distinct impression that the pain inflicted on family during the superintendents' professional struggles created more personal anguish for these men and women than the pain aimed directly at them. I sensed also that a measure of relief was afforded them during our conversation as they could finally candidly discuss their rage at the injustices their families silently suffered because of their career choice.

Chapter 5

Words From the Wise

Each superintendent's story about the superintendency was packed with examples of lessons learned, lessons that have meaning and application for aspiring (and even veteran) superintendents. Some of the lessons come from reflecting on strategies that worked well. Others are drawn from looking back at mistakes. Throughout the conversations, though, one thing was blatantly clear. All of the superintendents want other school district leaders to benefit from wisdom earned the hard way, wisdom accrued through their 250 combined years in the superintendency. With much interest, I've carefully gleaned this advice. It includes pearls of wisdom for school district leaders in all three phases of the superintendency: those preparing for the superintendency, doing the job, and moving on to something else.

The remainder of the chapter elaborates on my conversations with these men and women and the words of wisdom they want to share.

When Preparing for the Superintendency

Seek Broad-Based Experience

Most superintendents agree that there is no real way to prepare for this complex, demanding job other than on the job. But the superintendents I interviewed all asserted that before sitting in the superintendent's chair, it is critical that aspiring superintendents undertake and learn from a wide range of other educational jobs first.

All of the superintendents climbed the ladder one rung at a time. That is, they moved through the ranks of the organizational chart, grabbing insights and experiences along the way. All acknowledge the importance of experience. Three discussed openly their thoughts about having not first served as principals.

In Slate's view, not serving as principal was a gap in his learning. "Being a principal clearly is valuable. If I had it to do over again, I would be a principal."

Cleveland said that skipping the step of principal was more of an issue in the minds of the principals than in her mind. Her advice is simple and straightforward to aspiring superintendents who miss experiencing the principal's job: "Surround yourself where you have gaps."

As superintendent, Cleveland relied heavily on the principals' perspectives regarding school-based issues, and she hired senior administrators with principal experience.

Guerra acknowledged the politics of not being a principal, but believes he used the situation to his advantage. "I just told the principals that, since I had not been one, it would be unfair of me to try to tell them how to do their job. At the same time, I told them that since they had not been a superintendent, it would be unfair of them to second-guess how I should do my job." They got along just fine under that arrangement.

Along with advice about serving as principal, the veteran superintendents send messages through their own career patterns about gaining

multiple perspectives while ascending the ladder. Those I interviewed deliberately sought opportunities to broaden and enrich their career experiences. Guerra turned down an assistant superintendent position in curriculum and instruction because he had already gained that perspective. Instead, he waited for another opening as assistant superintendent for support services. He got the job and the added experience. Hamilton also served as an assistant superintendent for business operations to complement her expertise acquired as a teacher, counselor, and principal.

Other superintendents acquired central-office experience in positions such as special education and bilingual education. Still others found value in jobs outside of school administration. The state department of education proved valuable for Brown and Metz. Similarly, Slate, Timberland, and Keith added diversity to their career by preparing future educators at the university level. Before becoming a superintendent herself, Thomaskutty worked directly with superintendents as an educational consultant.

Even though the superintendents don't present a single, clear-cut career trajectory for aspiring superintendents to follow, they do present a clear-cut message: Diversify your experience base.

Find a Good Mentor (or Two)

Most of the superintendents expressed with deep emotion and affection the importance of professional mentors in their lives. In roles as principals and assistant superintendents, they all "went to school" on the successes and mistakes of senior administrators. In some cases, the mentor was a strong leader perceptive enough to see potential in these upstart administrators who didn't realize their own abilities. In other cases, the mentor was a visionary at the university or state level.

As a female superintendent, Thomaskutty believes aspiring women administrators can benefit from female as well as male role models. "There are lessons to be learned from the men who have done a good job. More pointedly, most women have not had the luxury of good male mentors."

In all cases, those who benefited from mentors attribute much of their own strong foundation to these influential individuals.

Get Off to a Good Start

As another basis for laying the foundation, two superintendents took deliberate steps to gain early exposure and rich information by immersing themselves in district operations before actually taking office. Brown believes he gained a distinct advantage by being in the district from April through June before his contract began in July. He used that time to talk face-to-face with staff and community to get a sense of where the system should be. He asked these important members of the educational community directly: "What are the strengths of the system? What are the weaknesses? What should I be working on?"

Hamilton discussed the value of a similar experience. She went to her district a few months before she officially started so she could get to know the people, observe, and get a jump-start on attending to issues and relationships. Both Brown and Hamilton agree it was time well spent.

Know That You Can't Know It All

While the superintendents agreed that laying a foundation is crucial, they also realized that nothing but actually walking in the superintendent's shoes can serve as adequate preparation. Porterhouse tells aspiring superintendents, "As you anticipate the superintendency, realize that there is not any kind of training you could have acquired, except some counseling, to help you understand that some things are outside your control."

Cleveland echoed the point, saying, "There is no coursework, no in-depth discussion that would have prepared me for this job." She inserted strong words about the need for universities to take stock of what they are doing in their attempts to prepare leaders.

Even when sharing words of caution, the superintendents were clear about the fact that their messages aren't offered to dissuade anyone from going after the superintendent's position. They are meant, rather, to signal to aspiring superintendents that important steps can and should be taken to increase the chances of enjoying success.

Some Special Words of Advice for Women and Minority Leaders

Along with asking for general advice for aspiring superintendents, I asked the women and ethnic minority superintendents about advice they have for aspiring superintendents like themselves. The following is what they offered.

Prove Yourself. One piece of advice was clearly directed at both women and minority school district leaders. The superintendents are adamant and unanimous in their conviction that women and minorities have to work harder and longer to achieve the same credibility as their white male counterparts.

According to Hamilton, "Women and people of color have to prove they can do the job. [On the other hand,] the white male network operates on the assumption that members of the club have to prove they can't do the job. If you know this up front, you do what it takes to be successful. You have to strengthen areas where you are less than adequate. I have always had in the back of my mind that others don't expect me (as a female African American) to be able to do it, so I set out to prove them wrong."

Expect, and Overcome, Rejection. Rejection is a reality for all school district leaders, especially women and minorities. Porterhouse spoke about overcoming gender prejudice. "I would have never been selected as superintendent in this district had I not been a classroom teacher here. In fact, one board member told me 'Porterhouse, our only reservation about hiring you was that you were female. But we hired you because of your reputation here as a teacher in the district.'"

Kincaid, who did her dissertation on women in the superintendency, "found that women tend to apply for two or three superintendencies and then quit. In contrast, men keep applying until they get the position. That's why I kept applying."

She said without embarrassment that she applied for 20 or 30 positions before she landed her first superintendency. So her advice, shared by her female colleagues, is not surprising, "Keep trying and never, *ever* give up until you get one."

Be a Lady? On the subject of acting like a "lady" or being one of the "guys," the women were split. According to Kincaid, "You win a lot more by being a lady, always polite . . . ." Hamilton believes "It works to your advantage as a woman in the South. People can only go so far before some man stands up and says 'You can't do that to her.'" Thomaskutty, in contrast, believes that women benefit from being able to get involved in things that have been traditionally enjoyed by men, including the golfing, drinking, and hanging out.

Regardless of their differences on this subject, the women were united in their advice on the subject of being tough decision makers. According to Hamilton, "Even if you are squirming on the inside, you have to present the image you can make tough decisions and you can use good judgment."

"The management style of women is more natural, listening, peacemaking, cooperative, finding compromises, instead of the macho style of traditional superintendents." But, said Thomaskutty, "you learn to be a tougher, faster decision maker."

Cleveland contends that women face the age-old issue of double standards. "If you're tough, people say you're too tough. If you're emotional, they say you're not tough enough."

Despite the special issues facing women, those I interviewed believe in themselves and they believe in other women. "I believe very strongly in bringing up good women," said Metz. "I think it's our time right now. Women generally have come up through the curriculum area and I'm seeing a few more people today who have come up through the elementary and middle school route. The days are over for the emphasis on the former football coach mentality.

"Being a scholar of education, knowing something about teaching and learning is absolutely critical now for superintendents of either gender, but particularly for females."

Be True to Yourself. Both Hamilton and Cleveland spoke about special issues they face as African-American superintendents. Hamilton talked at length about the difficult political issue she faced when challenging old norms related to ignoring the gaps between white and

black achievement. Because of her passion for children, she relentlessly pursued the question, knowing there would be initial anger and denial about the fact that anything was wrong. "Urban cities don't own the children. So I found myself at times being the conscience of the community."

Cleveland recalled the pain of having segments of the community accuse her of playing favorites if programs were implemented that primarily targeted minority students.

Guerra offered somewhat of a twist on the theme of playing favorites. While serving as his district's first Hispanic superintendent, he became a champion in the eyes of many community members. At the same time, regardless of his efforts, these same community members expected him to do more, in effect to show favoritism, because their cause had been neglected for so long. He noted that it was a huge pressure on him. Because he couldn't fulfill all of the expectations, he found that some of his loudest critics, those leading the charge to get rid of him, were Hispanic. But he had to do what he knew in his heart to be best for all children.

When Doing This Important Job

From the moment the ink is dry on the contract, new superintendents must begin proving their ability to effect positive change to a wide array of constituents with varied goals and agendas. Porterhouse described the superintendent's situation this way: "The only way to ride the horse is to stay in the saddle. Translated into education, if you are going to make changes in education, you are going to have to maintain enough stability, enough balance, to remain in the position. Because when you can't do that, you are taking the district nowhere."

The superintendents mentioned several activities as keys to leading effectively as a superintendent.

Build Positive Board-Superintendent Relationships

As discussed earlier, school board support and stability are critical to superintendent effectiveness. On this subject, the superintendents served up plenty of advice.

First, the veteran superintendents forcefully asserted that a new superintendent needs quality time, outside of conventional board meetings, with his or her board. Hamilton carved out quality time by planning with the board in a retreat setting with an agenda focused on the future.

Perkins applied a similar approach. He believes, "When you take a job, you need to have work sessions with the board to let them know who you are and so you get to know them."

Said Brown, "It's hard to demonize a person whom you know *as a person.*"

Second, the superintendents suggested that, right from the beginning, school district leaders ask boards under what conditions they want change. The superintendents found that boards have various ideas about the desirability of change. Sometimes boards want certain change, but not if it comes at a heavy price. Slate learned to ask boards up-front under what conditions they wanted change and whether they were willing to support change given the possibility of certain consequences, including community unrest.

"I quickly learned the fickleness of boards," said Slate. "I naively assumed that they were going to stay with me all of the time. I learned this by making mistakes, then having people angry with me."

Slate believes superintendents strengthen their relationships with boards by having a heart-to-heart talk about proposed change and the likely fall-out of enacting the change. But he tempers his advice to aspiring superintendents by saying that asking such questions is no assurance that the board's actions will be consistent with their words; but it's important to ask.

The superintendents also recommended strengthening board relationships by helping the board avoid making tough decisions under

emotional conditions. Some of the superintendents developed an understanding with their boards that emotional topics would not be acted on at the first discussion session on the topic. Other superintendents established an understanding that the majority of the board would not get "hooked" into discussions by single-interest board members trying to advance their narrow agendas. All the superintendents suggested establishing ground rules with the board up front on how to proceed during board meetings when the mood shifts from rational to emotional.

Negotiate Board-Superintendent Roles

One fact that makes board-superintendent relations tricky is that board composition changes quickly. As Zartow reminds us, "Every time you get a new board member elected to the board, you have a new board because it changes the dynamics of the board. You will have regression on the part of the board to the worst board member. Sometimes they [the board] will try to compromise to pull the outcast along ... but it will hurt the board."

One of the most consistent areas of tension between superintendents and board members is over policy versus administration. Keith ran into significant problems when he believed his board began micromanaging basic school district operations. Porterhouse and Kincaid discussed similar struggles.

Given the importance of clear roles and responsibilities, Garland pulled no punches when offering the following advice to all new superintendents: "In no place where I have worked or seen other people work has there been clear-cut roles between board and superintendent about the issue of policy versus administration. Indeed, there is a certain level of ambiguity and you need to know how to work it. The secret is to make sure you have a civil way to talk to the board about reconciling issues of policy and administration. I have never, *ever,* raised the issue with the board in the 12 years I have been here about 'You are stepping into my territory of administration.' I don't think it's the smart thing to do."

Garland then connected the policy versus administration power question to the changing agendas of school boards. "Particularly now, it's

becoming even more problematic for superintendents. The new board members coming into power are 40 year olds who are not trusting of institutions. For (new) superintendents to survive, they are going to have to recognize what they are dealing with and have a higher tolerance for crossing over this imaginary line between policy and administration without getting into a pissing contest with board members because ... well, because the superintendent will lose every time."

Other superintendents offered similarly strong words to newcomers about anticipating the changing makeup of boards and the associated changes in roles for superintendents in the future.

Keith said with an air of disillusionment, "I think the superintendency I trained for doesn't exist anymore. I think the position I started moving toward was more analogous to the position of CEO. The position was much less political.

"[When I started out,] people who ran for school boards looked upon it as a community service activity. Generally, the composition was business people who could feel great fulfillment in being an oversight board and working *with* the superintendent. They were in touch with the community. Theirs was a job of service. They understood the value of continuity in organizations.

"Over time, as public education has become more politicized, boards have become more political. The lines of policy versus administration have been extremely blurred."

Keith drew a parallel between the role of the superintendent in the future and the role of a city manager who forms coalitions to accomplish things and operates under the assumption that the coalitions will dissolve after the issue is put to rest. "It's going to be [the norm] in the future to form a coalition, move toward a goal, and have the board say 'I supported you on the previous issue but I don't support you on this one.'"

Because of this, Keith believes it is more important today than in the past for superintendents to be major champions of vision. He said simply, "If the superintendent of the future doesn't have vision, heart, and passion, he or she simply won't be able to do the job."

Clearly, boards now tend more to be short-term gain organizations with fragmented agendas. Garland shared his thoughts about why this is so. "We're having people move into positions of power, children of the '60s and '70s. As a general part of the culture, you have a cohort of the anti-Viet Nam perspective. These are the 'kids' who are moving into the influential positions. They come out of the pattern in their college years of questioning authority ... It's going to take a whole new breed of superintendent who has the capacity to deal with this ... maybe members of the same era who have a grasp on their [board members'] thinking."

Maintain Trust and Confidentiality

During our time together, Keith worried openly about the lack of trust and loyalty today between boards and superintendents. "It's not unusual today to have boards go out of executive session and discuss confidential topics with members of the community or political factions they are involved with. This makes it much more difficult to have candid discussions between the board and superintendent and [for them to] see each other as members of a team. There is more of an adversarial relationship today between boards and superintendents than at any other time in my memory."

Keith predicts that the superintendent-board governance model is in its last phase. "It has lost touch with the community it serves. When you get into constant fighting for power and control, you have a destructive governance structure. If whatever evolves out of the ashes of the struggle becomes better for kids, then it will be okay."

Perkins injected some humor into his advice for newcomers to the job. "If you can ever get a pediatrician to run for the board, do it! Everybody trusts a pediatrician."

Promote Positive Community Relations

Each superintendent discussed how important it is for new superintendents to gain extensive exposure to the entire community as soon as possible.

Metz logged long hours in the early years of her second superintendency; time she said was well spent. "The first 1 ½ years, I was out all of the time. People advertised rap sessions in their homes, in churches, even in taverns. The community got a chance to see the superintendent and what I stood for. In turn, I was able to describe how the community was changing, and that people needed to get their heads out of the sands of the past and look to the future." She credited this early exposure with helping the community come to terms with serious budget problems they were facing.

Slate "did a lot of speaking to every constituency I could the first three or four years. I tried to respond to what the community was saying about district needs."

Similarly, Garland credited his early, extensive exposure with the district's success rate on bond referenda. "We met with service clubs and explained the problems and we passed six straight referenda, with a voter approval rate of 80 percent."

And Guerra remembers with pride that during his first year he spoke to over 300 groups trying to promote community confidence in his leadership. His evidence that it paid off: "We went to the voters in October ... and passed a $150 million bond issue."

Cleveland established a joint committee of community and staff members centered on the principle that children come first, and she personally networked with many constituent groups. "We had to take the system back from the politicians. We also needed to build stronger relations with the unions due to strikes."

All the superintendents were quick to assert that, though it might be difficult, new superintendents must build strong relationships with multiple constituencies to lay a solid foundation for district success.

Work With, Not Against, the Union

The superintendents made it clear that when working with unions, as with all other groups, the principles of honesty and trust go a long way in building positive relationships.

Garland described a strategy used by many of his colleagues, "We met formally with teacher union officials on a regular basis. Our approach was to address issues seriously, concede where we should concede, and hold firm when it was necessary."

Timberland pointed to a strong working relationship with the union as a key to his district avoiding grievances for 13 years.

The conversations I held with the superintendents contained a common thread of advice for new superintendents: Don't underestimate the power of the union; do involve them to the extent possible in any actions that affect their constituency.

Befriend the Media

A well-known warning passed down through generations of superintendents is that the media buys its ink by the barrel. In other words, an individual superintendent is not wise to take on the media through the media. But, as superintendents acknowledge, the temptation is great.

During our interview, Slate spoke from personal experience about the power of both positive and negative media. "I had a real strategic alliance with a newspaper reporter. He helped to create a positive image for me as well as the district. I have the opposite situation now. We have a newspaper reporter who hates my guts."

Slate recalled how a new editor of the paper began his job by charging his cub reporter with the assignment, "Get Slate. He's the biggest target in town." Next, the reporter showed up in Slate's office and announced, "We can come into the schools any time we want and ask anyone any questions we want." Slate countered that if the reporter did that, he would have him arrested.

The fallout from this exchange was not pleasant, Slate said. "The editor said he was going to make my life miserable and he has."

Other superintendents also spoke with emotion about the misery inflicted by negative press. Cleveland talked at length about how much energy she exerted battling the media. Hamilton felt the sting over a research project in the health curriculum. There was press

coverage every day for two months and seven editorials on her in the space of one month. Ultimately, the district moved on to other issues, but the unpleasant memory of an unfriendly press still lingers for Hamilton.

Given the harsh realities of press coverage, first and foremost, the superintendents caution aspiring administrators to anticipate the power of the press. Second, they advise newcomers to be forthright and disclose as much information as possible as quickly as possible.

Said Perkins, "I was able to work with the press because I never lied to them." While this advice is not a guarantee against getting skewered, it goes a long way in establishing critical positive relationships.

When Moving On

It might seem unnecessary to devote a special section to advice about leaving a job. People leave jobs all the time. But exiting very few jobs involves the same visibility and political fall-out as leaving the superintendency. Most superintendents I interviewed have left at least one superintendency. Whether their exit was voluntary or not, and whether they were moving on to another superintendency, making a career change, or retiring, their reflections make clear that exiting can be a difficult process.

Knowing When to Fold 'Em

The superintendents discussed the need to be attuned to the nonverbal messages from the board and community that indicate it might be time to update the resume. According to Perkins, superintendents "need to work on the skill of recognizing the signs of when it's time to move on. Read people's actions as well as their words ... [Be wary w]hen the votes start not working out right ..."

Garland said directly, "When things start to turn, when you realize that you can't turn it around, get the hell out!" And he reminds aspiring superintendents that, "It doesn't matter what the broader community thinks; it's what the board members think. And I'm not talk-

ing about running from an issue. If anyone could have turned things around in [my] district, it would have been me because of my broad community support. But sometimes we stay too long out of self-delusion."

Guerra adopted a somewhat unconventional strategy for addressing the issue of staying or not staying. At the time of our interview, he said, "I'm comfortable enough with my career that I've turned the question over to the board by saying, 'If you think I'm still doing a good job, then give me a vote of confidence. If you don't think so, let me know and we'll talk about my planned exit.'"

Guerra indicated how precarious his position was, acknowledging, "It's just a matter now of one board member swinging to the point of thinking it's time for me to move on." A few months after our interview, Guerra did indeed move on — to the corporate world.

Keith advises superintendents to think of their careers as chapters in a book. The superintendency is only part of the book "When it ends abruptly, we need to remember that the book isn't finished yet. We need to turn the page and write the next chapter."

Looking for Another Superintendency

It is difficult, even in a low-profile position, to job hunt secretly. It is nearly impossible for superintendents. Superintendents who voluntarily look at other positions encounter a range of reactions from the community and board. According to Kincaid, "Most people in the community can't imagine why anyone would ever want to leave paradise." She advises superintendents to anticipate the community fallout associated with job hunting, which might include erosion of credibility it has taken a long time to establish.

Board members often take personally the superintendent's decision to consider another position. When it became known that he was looking at other opportunities, Zartow recalls being told by one board member, "We need a superintendent who's heart is in *this* district." He reminded the board member that his family had given a quarter of a century to the school system.

Kincaid was once one of two finalists for a superintendency in another district. The district did a site visit, and when she didn't get the job,

she had to go back and "kiss the feet of the board and say how foolish it was for me to ever consider leaving." She had to wonder whether the board would decide to let her go — to beat her to the punch, so to speak. She learned her lesson and said she would never let the process go that far unless she knew she was going to get the job offer.

When Metz considered applying to another district, her strategy was to convey to the board and community that it was a compliment to them that a nationally recognized school district would be interested in the work and progress the district enjoyed while she was superintendent. In fact, she did accept the superintendency in a nationally prominent district and her previous district took pride in what they had accomplished during her tenure with them.

Seeking Closure

New superintendents understandably spend little time thinking about how they will exit their careers. But as the stories in this book suggest, superintendents — and outstanding superintendents at that — sometimes find their tenures cut short by external forces. In fact, only two of the superintendents I spoke with actually ended their superintendencies on a note of closure. The rest crashed and burned without the closure they assumed would be waiting for them at the end.

Cleveland underscored the need for closure — for the superintendents, the district, and its students. When asked directly about the personal impact of continuing to live in the community where she had served as superintendent after her successor took office, Cleveland wasted no time sharing her thoughts and her very strong feelings. Choking back tears, she explained that in the three years since the change in superintendents, she had never been consulted by her successor. In her eyes, the new superintendent discredited all she stood for. With undisguised anger, she recalled what was being said in the community about the current superintendent's account of conditions under Cleveland's leadership.

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She spoke of highly talented people being demoted or fired. She recounted the experience of a university professor who led the development of an extremely successful curriculum during her tenure. When the professor attempted to meet the new superintendent, he was told that the superintendent had no interest in the program because it was a Cleveland administration program.

Cleveland echoed other superintendents' sentiments as she urged aspiring and new superintendents to acknowledge their predecessor's work and their predecessor as a valued citizen in the community. The superintendents I talked with have left great legacies on both counts. Their stories make it clear that the superintendency is not just a demanding job, but a lifestyle filled with important professional and personal accomplishment and anguish.

According to the outstanding leaders in this book, what makes it all possible is the centeredness that comes from having a set of core values, and what makes it all worthwhile is, of course, the kids.

All I Need to Know I'm Still Learning

Here are what I believe to be some of the "best of" bits of wisdom from the superintendents.

- ✔ When criticized on issues by special interest groups, don't let it become a personal matter.
- ✔ Be able to laugh.
- ✔ Define yourself on your own terms, not other people's. You will need to be self-reliant to get through the tough times.
- ✔ Don't get caught up in gossip.
- ✔ Be able to articulate your vision. Even though as superintendent you might feel that you know the direction in which the district needs to go, knowing it as superintendent is not enough. Other people have to come to know and believe in this direction, too.

- ✔ Be sure you can get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and like who you see (on the inside).
- ✔ Realize that to be effective you are going to annoy people. Ask yourself if you are willing to stand your ground based on your core principles.
- ✔ Understand that how you respond to people's anger can be the difference between your survival and your failure. In simple terms: Never wrestle with a pig; you both get dirty and the pig loves it.
- ✔ Know that other people will attribute motives to you that never crossed your mind. Prove your trustworthiness by your actions.
- ✔ Recognize your mistakes and correct them. Too many people will never admit a mistake.
- ✔ Be prepared for the good, the bad, and the ugly.

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Chapter 6

The Saving Graces: Core Values and Kids

Universal in the stories of these outstanding superintendents is a clear clarion for both current and aspiring superintendents: At whatever phase you find yourself in your career, do what you do with the anchor of core values driving you. As the superintendents unanimously declared, when the going gets tough … and it will … your core values give you strength to push ahead with what you believe is right and just.

As Perkins explained, "When it gets tough, you've got to reach deep in your back pocket and get whatever it takes to maintain what you believe and stand for."

For Perkins, integrity is paramount. "You can question my bad use of language, you can question my intelligence, you can question my commitment, but don't ever question my integrity."

Brown's core values come from his faith. "My source of strength is my faith. If you have faith and you act on faith, that is your core set of values. I enjoy and get energy from young people. I do believe so much in what they can do. You see, this job is not about buses, books, or buildings. It's about people."

At the close of each interview, I acknowledged the extremely difficult challenges facing superintendents and each superintendent's lonely journey. Then I asked each superintendent what sustained them over the long haul. Perkins didn't miss a beat with his answer. "Kids. Kids will come back and say the nicest things. I chose not to run for state superintendent because I want to deal with kids. That's what I'm here for. In 29 years, there were very few things that our kids were participating in that I didn't go to. In fact, I have a certificate thanking me for attending all of the district functions."

Perkins went on to recall an instance when a mother thanked him for caring enough to remember her daughter's name six years after she graduated. He seemed to swell with pride as he said with a trace of a tear, "You know, you can't buy that."

Kincaid concluded her interview by saying, "I love being a superintendent. I can't imagine doing another job. When I leave I will have fond memories of how our children have grown."

Similarly, Garland expressed pride in student achievement. When I asked him what held him together through the pain he endured during his final years on the job, he was quick to answer, "The kids who go to school here." He reported with justifiable pride that the kids get a very good education in his school district. "They can't do better anywhere else."

Metz also keeps kids first. "As superintendent, you hold the vision for the children and you continue to do that no matter what others are doing."

And Hamilton minced no words in her laser-beam focus on student achievement, "I am passionate about the student achievement issue. You have to stand for the children."

When asked about her greatest source of pride, Thomaskutty smiled and said, "That's easy. A goal met tangibly. That is, positive changes in achievement for children." She added that all of the other nonsense is worth it, as long as you can get results for the kids.

And when asked why she stayed in this business so long and endured such anguish along the way, Cleveland captured in two words the overwhelming sentiment of her superintendent colleagues, "Definitely, kids."

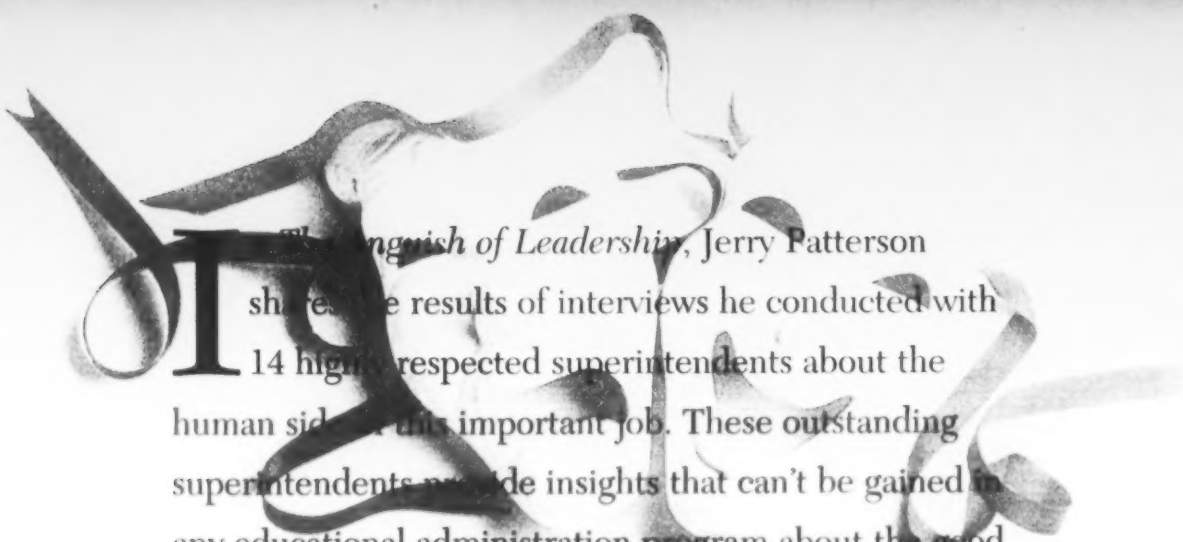
In this book, I have presented firsthand accounts of what it is like to be a school district leader today. Fourteen superintendents from diverse settings have chronicled their stories—stories bound together by three common threads, which I've call the good, the bad, and the ugly. All superintendents recounted the ugliness of the anguish they and their families suffered. All remembered the bad times as their support and their leadership began to slip. Most important, all these remarkable talented superintendents told me with pride about the good times. They recalled in vivid detail how they devoted a professional lifetime to being a champion of children. Even today, their legacy continues in the lives they touched so deeply, and I thank them for that, and for sharing their stories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerry Patterson is currently on the faculty in Educational Leadership at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. In his more than 30 years of experience as an educator, he has served as a superintendent, assistant superintendent, elementary school principal, and high school teacher. He has authored five nationally recognized books and published more than two dozen articles in professional journals.

Patterson has conducted workshops and presentations throughout the United States in the areas of leadership, resilience, and organizational change. Internationally, he has trained administrators in Slovakia, Israel, Nepal, and Canada.

He can be contacted at the School of Education, University of Alabama at Birmingham by phone at 205-975-5946; fax at 205-975-7581; or e-mail at jpat@uab.edu.



In *The Language of Leadership*, Jerry Patterson shares the results of interviews he conducted with 14 highly respected superintendents about the human side of this important job. These outstanding superintendents provide insights that can't be gained in any educational administration program about the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of school leadership.

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American Association of School Administrators
1801 N. Moore St.
Arlington, VA 22209
(703) 875-0748
http://www.aasa.org

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